

2012

# Facing History

Daniel J. Mahoney
*Assumption College*, dmahoney@assumption.edu

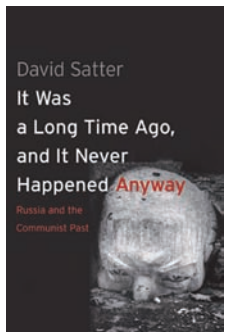


## Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Daniel J. "Facing History." Review of *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Rule*, by David Satter. *National Review* vol. 64 no. 4 (March 5, 2012). Pages 45-46.

# Facing History

DANIEL J. MAHONEY




*It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past,* by David Satter (Yale, 383 pp., $29.95)

David Satter has written two books that uneasily coexist under the same cover. The first is a welcome, if inadequately balanced, account of the failure of post-Communist Russia to come to terms sufficiently with the Communist past. The second is a scorching critique of "the Russian political tradition" for failing to acknowledge the "absolute value" of the individual and for privileging the various projects of the state above the human beings that it governs. Satter pleads for Russians to acknowledge their guilt for tolerating and participating in the violence and mendacity of the totalitarian state. He rightly calls on Russians "to face the full truth about Communism" and to stop insisting that the scale of its crimes have been exaggerated or that they somehow "were a product of necessity in a unique historical situation." But at the same time, Satter deeply roots the Soviet experiment in historic Russia. He ultimately sees Soviet Communism as a byproduct of an older Russian political tradition, one responsible both for the crimes of Communism and for the failure of post-Communist Russia to acknowledge adequately the criminal character of the Communist state.

*Mr. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology *and a co-editor of* The Solzhenitsyn Reader.

For Satter, Russia's only hope lies in a self-conscious break with its national traditions, since "the state tradition is what tsarism, the Soviet regime, and contemporary Russia have in common." He thus sides with those such as Tibor Szamuely and Richard Pipes, who blame Communism on an essentially slavish Russian soul and on a state tradition that is said to have no place for moderation or respect for the individual. There are many problems with this position, starting with the fact that it cannot account for the thoroughgoing Communist assault on the memory and traditions of historic Russia.

The book has considerable strengths. It does a brilliant job of chronicling the human consequences of Communism: the millions who died during the Red Terror and the famine and dekulakization of the Thirties, and the savagery of the Gulag. Like the best students of totalitarianism, Satter knows that human beings suffered as much from mendacity, from "forced participation in the lie," as from the brutalization of their bodies.

It is heart-rending to read his accounts of the efforts of those associated with Memorial (the most active of Russian groups attempting to pay tribute to the victims of Communism) to find and document mass graves, even as some of their compatriots look back nostalgically on the Soviet regime. Satter ably documents the tug-of-war between the anti-totalitarian convictions of the best Russians and the slow drive to normalize the Soviet past. One fascinating chapter discusses the (ultimately) failed effort to restore the statue of Dzerzhinsky, the father of the Soviet secret police, to a place of honor in Moscow.

Satter also intelligently grapples with the continuing "appeal of Communism." He shows how Russian patriotism is conflated with "Great Soviet patriotism" and the cult of World War II, while he rightly notes that the USSR won the war *despite* the terroristic character of the Stalinist regime. In addition, many people look back longingly to the "equality in servitude" that characterized the final post-Stalinist period of Communist rule. Satter acknowledges that the growing loss of interest in memorializing the victims of Communism, and the accompanying nostalgia for the Soviet past, has a great deal to do with the calamitous condition of Russia in the 1990s. During the Yeltsin period, lauded as "democratic" throughout the Western world, "cogs" of the old Soviet machine presided over "the largest transfer of property in history without the benefit of rule of law."

Satter's treatment of the various efforts to remember the crimes of Communism is nearly exhaustive. He shows how the efforts of Memorial and other Russian groups and individuals committed to an anti-totalitarian ethos, and to the recovery of national memory, have largely been met by indifference or hostility. But he overstates his case. For example, he faults the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in paying tribute to the thousands who perished under Communism. This has become a major part of the pastoral life of the Church, with February 7 now being commemorated annually as the "day of the new martyrs." Satter believes this and other church observances allow the state to get away with its own inadequate response to the historic crimes. But surely the Church deserves more credit for its efforts to honor the dead and to highlight the evils of totalitarianism.

Satter also says nothing about the television programs that in recent years have brought the truth about Communism to millions of Russian viewers. Russian state television has shown serializations of Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* and Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle*—outstanding productions that left out nothing essential. Surely a book that aims to provide a comprehensive account of contemporary Russia's relationship to the Communist past is obliged to acknowledge these positive developments. Nor does Satter say anything about the numerous comments by President Dmitri Medvedev about the need for Russia to forthrightly confront its history of oppression (he has been much more insistent on this point than Vladimir Putin). My point is not to deny that Russia's coming to terms with the Communist past has been halting, incomplete, and finally inadequate. It is simply to say that the record is considerably more complicated than Satter indicates.

One more example. Satter is absolutely right to criticize a new history textbook, written by Alexander Filippov, that was introduced into some Russian schools in 2008. That textbook praises

Stalin as "the most successful leader of the Soviet Union" and a man who was indispensable for both industrialization and victory in war. The textbook tepidly condemns terror, even as it relativizes it. But surely Satter ought also to have mentioned that a 500-page abridgement of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, scrupulously prepared by Solzhenitsyn's widow, was introduced to Russian schools in 2010. *The Gulag Archipelago* is the most powerful indictment of the crimes of Communism ever written, even though it is much more than this. The book joins two other works of Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Matryona's Home*, as required reading in Russian schools. That is a sign of hope.

This silence about the new edition of *Gulag* is probably connected to Satter's fundamental ambivalence about Solzhenitsyn. He admits that Solzhenitsyn did more than anyone else to tell the truth about Communism and to undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. But he insists that Solzhenitsyn does not believe in "universal values" and that he only "objected to political persecution when it was done for the wrong reasons." When Solzhenitsyn makes the perfectly sensible argument that human rights need to be balanced by a concern for human obligations, this is seen as evidence of his allegedly authoritarian inclinations. Satter confuses Solzhenitsyn's argument that Russians were victims par excellence of the Soviet regime with the absolutely false claim that he believes Russians have little to repent for.

It was in fact Solzhenitsyn who first raised the call for public penitence for Communism, in his great 1973 essay "Repentance and Self-Limitation as Categories in the Life of Nations." He repeated the call for personal and national repentance in the speeches he delivered to his compatriots in 1994, upon his return home from 20 years of forced exile in the West. At the University of Saratov in 1995, he spoke eloquently and forcefully about the poisoned atmosphere of a Russia that saw the unrepentant continue to hold high positions. And he called for everyone to repent: Perhaps "only 10 percent actually participated in the repressive apparatus," but the other 90 percent too often passed by injustices and "watched human beings trampled underfoot, and said nothing to save them and their families."

One cannot quarrel with Satter's claim that "Russia needs to end the imbalance between the status of the individual and the prerogatives of the state." My quarrel is with his tendency to blame Communism exclusively on a state tradition to which in truth it was alien, and his concomitant tendency to simplify the Russia that existed before 1917 as well as the one that was restored to life after 1991. The Russian state tradition is far more diverse than Satter suggests. It saw the development of a vibrant civil society after 1860 and the strengthening of constitutionalism in the years after 1905. Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister from 1906 to 1911 and one of the great statesmen of the modern period, precisely wanted to create citizen proprietors who were both independent of the state and the best guarantee of its stability. It was this possibility of a strong but free state that Bolshevism destroyed in the years after 1917. It attacked the pillars of the Russian old regime—the Church, the independent peasantry, and the intelligentsia—with a fury that was the hallmark of totalitarianism in the 20th century. Like many in the West, Satter looks to the provisional government of 1917 as an inspiration for "restarting" the Russian political tradition. But these rather pathetic "democrats" were incapable of standing up to the totalitarians to their left and quickly ceded power to Lenin and his Bolshevik party. They did not bring freedom to Russia, but anarchy and indecision that paved the way for the coming of totalitarianism.

Russia must indeed learn to "value the people it has." And for its moral health it must condemn the Communist regime that so recklessly disregarded the lives and liberties of its people. But it is a terrible simplification to blame Communism on a national and political tradition that it set out to eradicate. And Russians surely must have pride in the best of their traditions, which are not coextensive with either Communism or "oriental despotism." But these misgivings aside, Satter has written a thought-provoking book that does much to illumine the nature of the totalitarian experience in the 20th century, as well as the pressing need for Russians to come to terms with it if they are to have a future worthy of a great people and nation. **NR**

# Evident Truths

JOE CARTER


*The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism,* by Jeffrey Bell (Encounter, 296 pp., $25.95)

'Faith is a very, very important part of my life," said Rick Santorum in a recent Republican presidential debate in Florida, "but it's a very, very important part of this country. The foundational documents of our country—everybody talks about the Constitution, very, very important. But the Constitution is the 'how' of America. It's the operator's manual. The 'why' of America, who we are as a people, is in the Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.'"

As Jeffrey Bell claims in his new book, *The Case for Polarized Politics*, most social conservatives believe that the central principle asserted in the Declaration of Independence is undeniable. Bell contends that this is what divides social conservatives from social liberals: "Most—not all—social conservatives believe the words in that sentence are literally true. Most—not all—opponents of social conservatism do not believe those words are literally true."

Social conservatives believe rights are given by the theistic God (most often assumed to be the God of the Bible) and are an irrevocable gift to all humanity,

*Mr. Carter is online editor of* First Things *and a co-author of* How to Argue Like Jesus.